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Perez's Power Play  
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Eddie Perez was elected mayor of Hartford a year ago, a political novice in a largely ceremonial office. Since then he has outfoxed his party elders, thrown himself into the city's hottest political f

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Thomas D. Ritter laughs now when he recalls the advice he gave a year ago to Eddie A. Perez, then Hartford's mayor-elect. It wasn't bad advice. In fact, plenty of other political professionals gave Perez the same counsel.

It's funny only because it shows how little Ritter, a former House speaker, and the rest of Hartford's political elite knew of Perez, the political neophyte who was about to take office as the city's first Latino mayor.

Ritter told Perez to back off from an unexpected pre-inauguration showdown with his running mates, the Democratic city council slate, over the selection of an interim city manager. Four of the six Democrats abruptly informed Perez they had settled on an interim manager without him.

Don't buck the party, not over an interim manager, Ritter advised Perez. Don't make enemies, not with a chance to be elected Hartford's first strong mayor under a new charter in 2003.

"I thought he had so carefully considered what it would take to be a strong mayor that it would be an easy calculation to make," Ritter said. Then he laughed and added, "I guess I didn't know him well enough."

Who did?

Never in Hartford politics has one man been so misread by so many. Perez, of course, did buck the rebellious four Democrats, stripping them of power by assembling a five-member majority from three minority-party members and two loyal Democrats.

His flanking maneuver a year ago defined Perez as a politician, set the tone for one of the most eventful years at city hall - and made him enemies who hope to block his re-election next fall. It is a bargain he would make again.

Like all his predecessors since 1947, when Hartford enacted a council-manager form of government, Perez has no authority under the city charter. Yet he is indisputably the most powerful man in city hall as he approaches the midpoint of his first term.

Perez has been able to install his choices for interim and permanent city manager, play a key role in controversial School Superintendent Anthony Amato's recent resignation and place himself in charge of school construction.

"I think early on he made a decision," Ritter said. "He wanted to govern."

Perez, 45, a former community organizer best known for helping Trinity College usher to reality a complex of magnet schools called the Learning Corridor, is not a patient man, as has become evident. He said he is used to seeing a problem, then immediately attacking it.

In a series of interviews, Perez for the first time has made clear how strongly he disdains what he calls the abdication of responsibility at city hall for the major issues facing Hartford: improving its schools, making its streets safer and attracting development.

At the city's invitation, the state took control of the schools five years ago. The city's major redevelopment project, Adriaen's Landing, is overseen by the quasi-public Capital City Economic Development Authority. Even the city's local economic development commission is quasi-public body with no direct oversight in city hall.

"Whether it's the school system, whether it's the economic development function, whether it's Adriaen's Landing, we sort of say, 'Well, we can't do it, so we'll get out of the way and allow somebody else to do it for us,'" Perez said. "I think it's not a responsible way for us to run municipal government."

Perez said the city needs to continue collaborating with the state and with the business community - he recently invited the state police back to work with Hartford officers on the drug problem - but the era of walking away from problems is over.

"If we do it in collaboration with somebody else, but we're still in control and we're still making the tough decisions, that's fine," Perez said. "But sort of punting on a lot of this stuff is not an option."

With the backing of Perez and a wide coalition of community activists and political leaders, Hartford voters recently approved a new charter that will give Perez, or whoever beats him next fall, a four-year term in office and unprecedented power.

After the 2003 election, the mayor will have the power to hire and fire department heads and the ability to appoint a majority of the board of education. Perez said the activism of his first term, tempered by the limits of council-manager government, is a predictor of how he would govern as strong mayor.

"Right now, I have to be careful I have consensus on the council. I have to make sure I don't interfere with the day-to-day administration of the manager and department heads," Perez said. "When the charter changes, I am going to have four years to make things really move. And I plan to do that. I don't plan to wait around and come up with excuses as to why things are not happening."

Perez will get a taste of direct power next month. Under the terms of the state takeover legislation, control of the schools will return to a transitional board composed of four elected and three appointed members. The mayor will name those three members.

To the consternation of some advisers, Perez has placed improving the schools, a difficult task over which he has little direct control, high on his to-do list. The mayor, his advisers fear, runs the risk of being held accountable for the schools.

Perez said that the school board and superintendent clearly are in charge of the schools, but that the mayor must be engaged. With 55 percent of the city budget going to education, coordination of the schools and city hall must be improved, he said.

"I have to care about how the schools are performing," Perez said. "It's like saying, 'Well, the chief is in charge of the police department. I can't interfere with the way it's running.' If he does a good job, then I don't interfere. But if he's not doing a good job, then I have to get engaged."

Perez said he never will tell a professional educator or police chief how to run their departments, but he also will not be afraid to hold them accountable if they are not responsive to the public.

This direct talk is startling, given how little Perez shared about his vision of leadership during a lackluster campaign for mayor last year. It is safe to say Perez commanded the least respect of any candidate to win an election with 75 percent of the vote.

A mediocre public speaker in two languages, Perez waged a less than electrifying campaign over a weak field of candidates. It was as though the office of mayor was so devalued that no one wanted it. How else to explain Perez's stroll to victory last year?

His running mates had every reason to think he could be handled. At a raucous nominating convention, Perez was unable to place more than two close allies, Hernan LaFontaine and Calixto Torres, on the six-member Democratic council slate.

But the resolve Perez showed in assembling the five-vote coalition is evident to those who look for it, said Veronica Airey-Wilson, the Republican councilwoman who leads the mayor's coalition as deputy mayor. He listens to different views, but he quickly and directly comes to the point, she said.

"The thing about Eddie is when he gets ... behind closed doors, it's 'This is it. This is what I feel. Take it or leave it.' He's not going to put up with a lot of bull," Airey-Wilson said.

She said the mayor has impressed her by keeping a promise to keep the five-member coalition together for the entire two-year term, not just long enough to pick his own manager. The coalition is composed of Airey-Wilson, LaFontaine, Torres, Elizabeth Horton Sheff of the Green Party and Republican Robert L. Painter.

The unlikely coalition has held without a single defection on any significant issue in its first 11 months in office.

The minority is Louis Watkins, Marilyn Rossetti, John B. Kennelly and Kenneth Kennedy. Watkins was set to lead the council, backed by a North End faction to which Kennelly and Kennedy owed their nominations.

Tensions between the coalition and minority have lessened somewhat since the early council meetings, when Perez tried to shut off debate. Watkins reminded them it takes six votes to end debate.

But Watkins said Perez shares little information with them, even though most major initiatives have passed unanimously. The mayor's cool relationship with the minority contributed to one of his few political setbacks, a messy fight over closing the Rawson School.

The Democratic minority objected to the closing during the budget debate, warning that the school superintendent had done little to prepare the community. Perez and the majority ignored them, saying the city could not afford to give the school system enough money to keep Rawson open.

Months later, Perez and the majority reversed themselves and provided the additional funding.

Although Perez has been assertive in political matters, it is less clear what his role was in the city hall shake-up engineered by his choice for interim manager, Albert Ilg. The retired town manager of Windsor, Ilg came into office with the goal of trimming what he saw as a bloated bureaucracy.

He was allowed to cut as he saw fit. Despite a \$47 million budget gap projected last December, Ilg presented a balanced \$422 million budget that did not require an increase in Hartford's high property tax rate. It passed with minor changes.

Attributing authorship for the flurry of moves Ilg made to professionalize city hall is difficult. Ilg reorganized public works, fired the finance director, and began the merger of city and school information-technology and building-services functions.

Perez took no credit for the changes, though he was supportive. The council and mayor seemed to leave Ilg to do as he saw fit, in some cases plainly pleased to be spared the political backlash.

Neither Ilg nor Perez would discuss in detail the mayor's role behind the scenes; Perez said only that he supported Ilg's changes. The lack of Perez's fingerprints on the changes left some employees wondering if the reforms would continue after Ilg was replaced by Lee C. Erdmann in August.

They have.

The Rev. Wayne A. Carter, who recently was elected to the board of education, is one of the black ministers Perez sometimes consults. Carter, who is dynamic in the pulpit, said Hartford should not look to its mayor for uplifting rhetoric, just decisive action.

"It's obvious and clear the mayor is an activist. He knows how to organize, how to strategize. I don't fault him for not having other gifts," Carter said.

Initially guarded in his public comments, Perez has, however, grown blunter and bolder. The mayor no longer hides his frustration with the pace of progress in the police department under Chief Bruce P. Marquis. He said the chief inherited a troubled department, but after 18 months as chief Marquis has to take charge.

"Through the manager, I've been pushing for better communication, better policy direction. I think you have a morale problem in addition to all the other problems with the police. He has to rise to the occasion," Perez said of Marquis. "I'm empowering him to do just that. He has to tell me what else he needs from the mayor's office to make him more effective - but he has to be more effective."

Then there is Amato, whose will-he-stay, will-he-leave-routine had become a distraction.

Amato had sought assurances of Perez's support if he stayed. Many thought that Perez would give it, if only to maintain his Latino power base - like Perez, Amato is Puerto Rican. But Perez refused to back the superintendent.

Without Perez ever having given a public sign of his displeasure, the superintendent tearfully announced his resignation.

"It's clear Eddie moved on Amato. That's key. That's masterful," said Steve Harris, a former councilman. "I think in his little, unassuming way, he got it done."

The compliment by Harris is noteworthy. He is one of several politicians who have been approached by North End Democrats about challenging Perez. Carter is another, though he has ruled out running for mayor in 2003.

Harris sees little on which the mayor is vulnerable, aside from his break with the Democrats. And even then, he is unsure if that resonates beyond political insiders.

"Aside from that, there's nothing else you can point to" as a potential issue, Harris said. "For the most part, there is a large segment who are just starving for good government. Look, we just want somebody who, if it's screwed up, will fire somebody."

Ritter is unsure how Perez's direct style will wear over time.

"This style tends to get quicker results - and leads to shorter tenures," Ritter said. "Do you want to be the most popular guy and do little and stay longer? Or do you step up, make a decision and make a few enemies? Political capital is there to be used."

And Perez, Ritter said, is willing to use it.  
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